

ROHINGYA CRISIS

Why bilateral initiatives with Myanmar have failed

SULTANA YESMIN

BANGLADESH, the largest destination for Rohingya refugees, has, by far, received a large number of Rohingyas since 1978 in four phases—before the 1990s, after the 1990s, post-2012, and post-2017. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2017 reported that an estimated 200,000 to 500,000 undocumented and 33,000 registered Rohingya refugees had been living in Bangladesh. In the aftermath of the post-2017 Rohingya crisis, the government of Bangladesh permitted an additional 700,000 Rohingyas to take shelter in Bangladesh until their safe return to Myanmar.

In the wake of continuous influx of such large numbers of Rohingyas, the government of Bangladesh has long been pursuing Myanmar for a peaceful and sustainable solution of the Rohingya crisis. Bangladesh has been engaged in constant dialogues with Myanmar for resolving the crisis. For instance, Bangladesh signed a deal with Myanmar on November 23, 2017 for the possible repatriation of thousands of Rohingya refugees. Both countries also formed the 30-member Joint Working Group (JWG) on December 19, 2017 (15 from each country) for the safe return of forcibly displaced Rohingyas. However, despite all these deals and agreements, no tangible progress has yet been observed on finding a permanent solution to the crisis.

First, Myanmar's stubborn position against granting citizenship rights to Rohingyas has stalled the successful repatriation of these refugees from Bangladesh to Myanmar. On the subject of repatriation, Myanmar only



A Rohingya woman wades to the shore with her children after crossing the Bangladesh-Myanmar border by boat through the Bay of Bengal in Teknaf.

PHOTO: REUTERS

agreed to accept Rohingyas as "foreigners" or "Bengali Muslim citizens," not as the country's ethnic group. According to this policy, Myanmar instructed all Rohingyas to register as "Bengalis" in 2014, thereby effectively excluding them from the national census. For instance, Myanmar's former Foreign Minister U Nyan Win once remarked, "[SPDC] is willing to accept the return of refugees from Myanmar if they are listed as Bengali Muslim minorities but not if they are Rohingyas, because Rohingyas are not Myanmar citizens."

This step of the Myanmar government has,

in fact, intensified the crisis and made its willingness on bilateral negotiations deeply questionable. If Rohingya refugees are to be repatriated from a host country such as Bangladesh, how is it justifiable to enlist them as "Bengalis" or "foreigners"? And how can we call it "repatriation"? Thus, the terms and conditions imposed by the government of Myanmar upon Rohingya refugees by identifying or enlisting them as citizens of a host country are completely absurd.

Second, Myanmar's strategy of only accepting "verified refugees" through the verification process creates another challenge

to the successful return of Rohingyas from Bangladesh to Myanmar. The requirements of "citizenship verification" include copies of expired citizenship cards or national registration cards and documents of the residence of Rohingyas' ancestors in Myanmar. According to Amnesty International, it is "deeply problematic" to demand that Rohingyas prove their residency with documents, when they were removed from the official residency lists and never allowed to receive new identity cards under the 1982 Citizenship Law. Amnesty International also reports that Rohingyas, who were citizens under the 1948 Citizenship Act, never received new identity cards created under the 1982 Citizenship Law of Myanmar.

Amnesty International's research conducted since 2012 finds the "deliberate and arbitrary deprivation of valid documentation," which has actively been done by Myanmar authorities to intentionally deprive Rohingyas of citizenship documentation. Now, the matter of concern is that without proof of residence, as per the conditions imposed by Myanmar, Rohingyas will neither be eligible for citizenship in Myanmar nor will they be able to return to the Rakhine State. Such conditions are nothing but virtually impossible for Rohingyas to meet in order to return to their homeland.

Third, the problematic citizenship verification process under National Verification Cards (NVCs), a temporary identification card issued by Myanmar in July 2014 to verify citizenship claims, further complicates the procedure of Rohingyas' repatriation, as it does not guarantee citizenship in Myanmar, rather requires

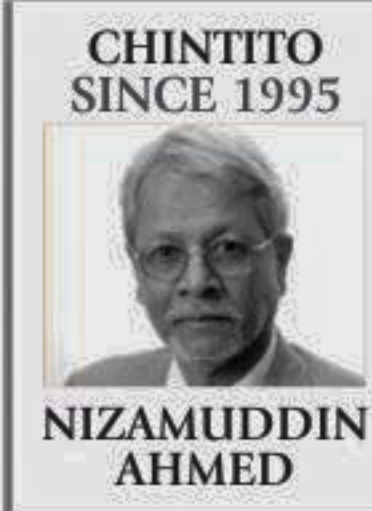
Rohingyas to be identified as "Bengali" on the application form. Rohingya community leaders and international human rights organisations have criticised the ID card system. Many Rohingyas have already refused to apply for the NVCs and have also reflected their unwillingness to go back to Myanmar without ensuring citizenship and other rights.

Fourth, the absence of a congenial environment in the Rakhine State for the safe and dignified return of Rohingya refugees remains another key challenge. For example, when the repatriation of the first batch of 2,200 refugees was about to start officially on November 15, 2018, as per the bilateral deal and agreement, none of these refugees agreed to return to their place of origin for the fear of fresh persecution by Myanmar's military junta. Amid their protests and unwillingness to return, Bangladesh, thus, cancelled the repatriation of the first batch of Rohingyas. As a responsible member of the international community, Bangladesh has always vowed the safe and voluntary return of Rohingyas to whom the country has given shelter in its territory since 1978.

These are some of the reasons why bilateral initiatives with Myanmar have not been effective in dealing with the Rohingya crisis. The Rohingya refugee crisis, unfortunately, is bound to continue unless Myanmar actively engages in bilateral cooperation with Bangladesh and abandons its policy of systemic exclusion of Rohingyas and ensures a safe environment for them.

Sultana Yesmin is a PhD candidate at the School of Politics and International Studies (SPIS), Central China Normal University, Wuhan, Hubei, China. Email: sultanayesmin@gmail.com

Let architects do their job



ARCHITECTS, not all, will perhaps offer a convincing reason for choosing the subject and the profession. Dialectics may vary from wanting to beautify the environment to contributing to the nation's infrastructural development, or more rudimentarily, from being inspired by Montu Kaka, to simply "bhallage". In being bent towards skin-deep beautification, the architecture student may unknowingly convey to the less informed public as well as the engineers that his work is superficial. In truth, the wisdom of architecture is experienced by a content user and the visitor to an edifice (or space) without essentially understanding the cause of their joy.

I too had a reason. Letter marks in two SSC math papers did not dispel my trepidation about numbers. Thus, a misconception that the five-year course had nothing to do with numerals led me enthusiastically to the hallowed corridors of my department at BUET.

Little did I know that courses on Structure was all about bending moment and kips, Electrical Equipment about ohms and watts, Mechanical Services about differential equations, Plumbing about head pressure and thermal expansion, and of course there was maths in every sense of the word. In the end however they all made sense because honestly any part of a syllabus I ignored during studentship came back in vengeance; it's mathematical components greatly retarding till today my architectural design performance. Ignorance is not bliss.

Another incidental reason, though I had no way of knowing, was my 1972 batch was at the helm of women's revolution in technology education in Bangladesh. Almost

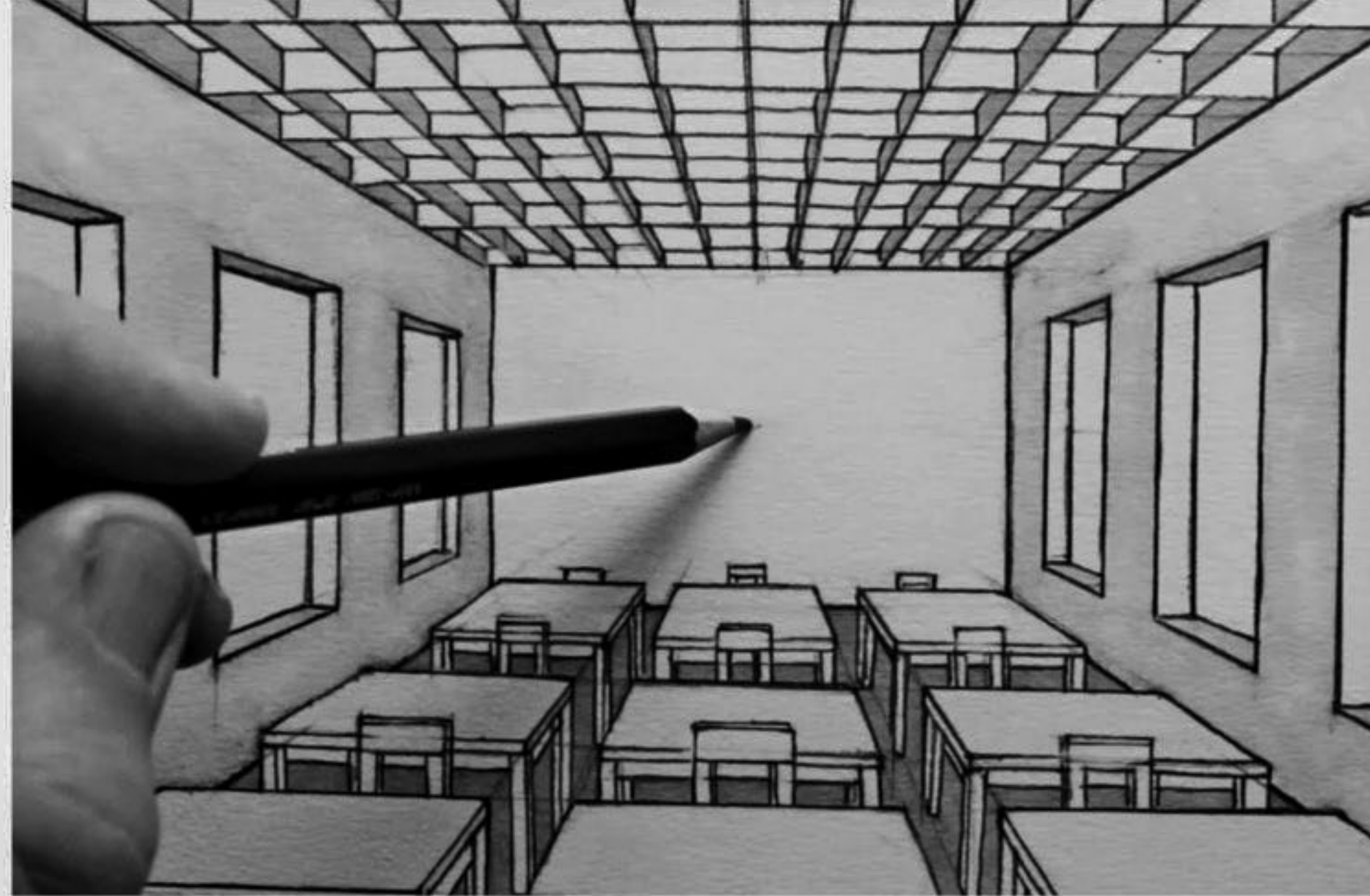
a third of my thirty-five classmates were girls. After almost forty-five years, despite ups and downs, and breakups, we remain friends in split clusters. Together we roamed the terraces of the Roman Forum, we scaled the pyramid of Cheops, we orated by the stones of Parthenon, we braved the waves to reach Elephanta, we meditated at Paharpur, and we discovered light and shade at Shalban Bihar and in the courtyards of Ruplal House and Baro Bari.

We created castles with dots and lines, composed soaring skyscrapers with cardboard planes, and crafted space with voids in the same classroom but with unimaginable variations. Unintentional plagiarism is not possible in my profession. Today we make palaces for middleclass customers, build bridges between communities, compel a pedestrian to whistle as he strolls by a wall, and make children shout in joy in spaces that have attained the status of architecture. The architect must enjoy the moment of designing, be it with pencil or on a keyboard; I do. It has to be his passion.

The foremost quality of an architect is to understand and serve people, not only his paymaster client, but also members of the public whom he may never get to meet. The architect has to comprehend common human behaviour in delineating his dots, lines and planes, solids and voids, colours and shades of grey.

Through interpretation of the human mind, evaluation of the environs, choosing between materials and appreciating the usual financial constraints, counteracted with overwhelming client needs, architecture can meet the changing physical, socio-cultural and psychological aspirations of users. As a master of meaningfully juggling building components, the architect conceives better places in more liveable communities.

In his continuous endeavour to seek for the users a hospitable relationship between



the inside and the outside, often the threshold, the architect is a natural guardian of the environment. The successful architect leaves a place better than when he first visited the site, like Baden-Powell's Scout, whom he implored before his death in 1941 to "Try and leave this world a little better than you found it..."

The architect can only deliver with brilliance through incessant knowledge and keen observation. An architect who has stopped to learn and perceive is a dead architect. A practising architect is trained by numerous design exercises well beyond his academic life to attain the ability to walkabout in his proposed building even before ground has been broken. There lies his advantage over others, especially his client, who may need the impossible life-size model to do the same.

Whereas there are countless factors

contributing to an architectural design, the most important and decisive one must be "the client". I am a proponent of my own adage that "Good architecture depends on a good client". The building owner, a Board of Directors or an individual, public or private, should allow the architect to work independently for a scheduled time to achieve a worthwhile proposal that he will obviously defend, or risk being replaced. Real-life drama is a tragedy with many clients unduly and unnecessarily interfering at design and execution stages, resulting in a hodgepodge of widened rooms, truncated toilets, poor lighting and ventilation, and puzzling circulation. The situation is terrible during construction when some clients even befriend the contractor, mason and carpenter.

Post-construction phase takes yet another turn. If others commend the building, then the owner will claim all credit. If he is

married, then it's his wife who gave all the major instructions. If however there are complaints here and there, then we all know who the client will blame, although it was he who meddled out of turn.

The same client diligently never intervenes in the decision of his medical doctor for fear of his life. Nor does he stick his nose in engineering matters for fear of the building collapsing or becoming electromechanically non-functional. Since he is certain that defying the architect will not lead to his death or that of the building, he assumes the role of Tutankhamun. This is where he is grossly wrong. Losses incurred in an architecturally badly designed building include negative effects on the health and mental wellbeing of residents. The otherwise benefits to those who view from outside are also negated.

In the national context, by undermining the role of the architect, some ministers, secretaries, corporate chairs and department directors have been doing harm at the cost of public money. In many cases, their lackeys encourage them to defy the architect and assume the function of an "expert". These administrative, non-technical bosses decide what is "best" for the building. The concern of the country and interest of the public are swept under their thick carpet.

Let the physician attend to your health needs. Let the engineer steady your mansion. Let the shoeshine man polish your boots. Let the chef prepare your wedding biryani. For creating better buildings and inspiring urban spaces, and rural, for a better environment, let the trained experts do their work. That is best for you and the nation.

P.S. This column also calls out to architects to carry out their duties responsibly with accountability and dependability.

Dr Nizamuddin Ahmed is a practising architect, a Commonwealth Scholar and a Fellow, a Baden-Powell Fellow Scout Leader, and a Major Donor Rotarian.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY
 DECEMBER 21, 1991
 SOVIET UNION FORMALLY DISSOLVED
 Soviet Union formally dissolved as 11 of 12 republics sign treaty forming Commonwealth of Independent States

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH
 ACROSS
 1 Take on
 6 Letter flourish
 11 Hawaiian island
 12 Cookout spot
 13 Moving about
 14 Skilled
 15 Infant outfit
 17 Pound sound
 19 Cozy retreat
 20 Bran bit
 23 Gangster's gun
 25 Hide, in a way
 26 Askew
 28 Like some wines
 29 Chant
 30 Workout unit
 31 Some crime evidence
 32 Army bases:
 Abbr.
 33 Hogwarts grounds-keeper
 35 November birthstone
 38 Humiliate
 41 Love to pieces
 42 Arrive
 43 Sugar source
 44 Business bigwigs
 DOWN
 1 Alias letters
 2 "... Kapital"
 3 Not conforming
 4 Aspirin target
 5 Fed up with
 6 Iberian nation
 7 Walk in water
 8 Snacked
 9 Try the tea
 10 Blazing
 16 Looking for
 17 Cheering loudly
 18 Blush kin
 20 Obsolete
 21 "... we all?"
 22 Whitewalls, in whitehall
 24 New England catch
 25 Diner sandwich
 27 Furious
 31 Stunned states
 33 Hind's mate
 34 Alpine goat
 35 PC key
 36 Lyric poem
 37 "Lenore" writer
 39 Attack command
 40 Print units
 Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to dsopinion@gmail.com.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER
 BACKS FALL
 INANE RENEE
 TIPIN ORGAN
 OMIT HONEST
 FAT SUM LEO
 FLATTERS
 SLAY AIDE
 PLATTERS
 HUG ICE MAC
 UNREST RISE
 STUNT BEGUN
 KINDS ADORE
 SETS NODES

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER
 IT'S 6:00! YOU'RE UP EARLY!
 I HAD A LATE DATE
 YOU'RE GOING TO BED?
 YEAH, IF I SLEEP 16 HOURS, I'LL BE BACK ON SCHEDULE!
 GREG+ MORT WALKER
 BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT
 DO YOU REMEMBER HOW MONOPOLY ENDS?
 USUALLY IN TEARS OF BOREDOM, DISAPPOINTMENT AND ANGER.
 THEN WE MUST BE FINISHED.
 BEDTIME, EVERYBODY!